

Helping Girls in South Africa *to Reach for Their Dreams*

by Kathleen Wilson Shryock

When Portia Kekana was 18-years-old, she became a mother. In South Africa, where teen pregnancy is common, it would have been easy for her to slip through the cracks. Poverty, substance abuse, and disease become defining factors for many young women facing similar

circumstances. But Kekana was one of the lucky ones. Armed with the desire to achieve and a supportive family who valued academic learning, she was able to complete her education. Now, a graduate of Vista University and the University of Cape Town, Kekana is reaching out to girls across her country. As the founder of the Girls' Enrichment and Empowerment Academy (GEEA), she hopes to equip a new generation of South African women with the life and leadership skills to succeed.

Kekana explains that GEEA was started in 2009 as a platform through which young girls can learn to embrace who they are, without compromising their gender. As in most societies, South African preteen and

adolescent girls are vulnerable to pressures from their peers, the media, and cultural norms. Add easy access to alcohol, lack of resources, and the invasion of the AIDS epidemic, and adolescence can be a mine field. "I felt the need to help young girls make informed decisions and not fall into the same trap that I did," explains Kekana. "GEEA aims to supply the girls with the information that will help them make better choices, reaffirm their uniqueness, and help them to realize that their dreams are within reach."

In early 2010, Kekana and long-time friend Jean-Rose Msiza began preparations for a GEEA seminar, a weekend of instruction and fellowship designed to promote free expression and enhanced self-esteem. Msiza explains that her work as a social development facilitator in rural areas of South Africa fueled her desire to get involved. "I experienced the challenges faced by rural woman and girls, and I wanted to do something to alleviate the burden," she says. "I saw GEEA as an opportunity to promote social justice."

Together, the women sought the resources needed to host the event. Receipts such as the Bob Tryanski Presents "I Have a Dream, Too!" Challenge Grant and personal contributions from individuals such as Kathy Coll, assistant executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils, helped the women's vision to become a reality. "The thing that made this project really special, was that Kathy Coll and I were able to combine resources from two awards we each received last year in order to make this happen," notes Tryanski. "Kathy was the recipient of the 2009 NASC Warren Shull Advisor of the Year Award, and I received the Earl Reum Award from the National Association of



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Workshop Directors in December. When Portia shared her vision for the GEEA program, Kathy and I knew it was the perfect way to spend the prize money from those awards. The Earl Reum Award was sponsored by workshop directors and activity advisors from all over the country, so it really embodied the Keep It! Campaign's challenge to Act Locally, Reach Globally. Thanks to the generosity and support of some of this country's finest activity advisors, Earl Reum's influence in sowing the seeds for leadership education throughout the United States has now been extended to South Africa to support Portia's dream."

In May, fourteen girls arrived at the site of the National Girl Guides Association in Randburg, Johannesburg to take part in the first GEEA seminar. Throughout the weekend, the girls participated in team building activities and group discussions about self awareness, goal setting, problem solving, spirituality, leadership, sexuality, and financial literacy. Attendees also heard presentations from motivational speakers—doctors, social workers, and business professionals—who had volunteered their time and talents to share important messages rooted in relevant, personal experiences.

Msiza notes that one of the highlights of the seminar was a presentation from 23-year-old Naledi Kekana. As the child of a young, single mother, Naledi experienced many of the same social and economic barriers faced by the girls in attendance. Now an executive assistant at a prominent investment company, she credits her success with a conscious choice to make responsible decisions, a quality education, and a commitment to community service. She noted that volunteer work allowed her to learn valuable skills and also to develop a network of quality resources. "Naledi was so inspiring telling the girls about the choices she made, her love for the country, and the opportunities available to those who are prepared to serve," says Msiza. "The girls asked daring questions, and I was encouraged by their open-mindedness."

Botshelo Ramela, an adolescent who attended the seminar, believes that lessons learned during the event will lead to a brighter future for many of the attendees. She was especially affected by Naledi Kekana's message. "She opened up her life to us. Despite the challenges she faced, she conquered all barriers," says Ramela. "I think her determination was contagious, because now, I possess it within me."

Kgomostso, another attendee, notes that the experience increased her self-confidence and encouraged her to resist peer pressure. "The enrichment and empowerment seminar has taught me to handle the temptations and difficulties that the world has to offer," she says. "It has opened my eyes. Now, I can have confidence. I know it's going to be hard out there, but I can believe in myself."



Through GEEA, young girls learn to embrace who they are, without compromising their gender.

To help solidify the seminar's impact, facilitators scheduled a two-day, follow-up workshop that provided the girls with the opportunity to further discuss topics initiated at their first meeting. A picnic has also been scheduled that will allow Kekana and Msiza to reconnect with the attendees and to reaffirm the value of each individual girl. "The girls provided me with an opportunity to realize that I do have something to offer," she says. "It is amazing how much I get edified and how my eyes get opened to the harsh realities that some young people have to contend with. I was humbled by the extent to which these young women have so much to live for and how they are prepared to make the best from small beginnings."

Buoyed by the seminar's success, Kekana hopes to reach out to many more young women through GEEA initiatives. Soon, she will host a career fair where girls will be invited to explore new opportunities. Ultimately, she would like to establish GEEA as a self-sustaining nonprofit organization.

Kekana is also building on the blueprint developed during the first GEEA seminar and plans on presenting a replicable model of the camp at sites throughout South Africa including Ivory Park. She hopes that the life and leadership lessons stressed by GEEA will arm young women with the confidence to take control of their lives and the courage to reach for their dreams.

As GEEA takes root in South Africa, Kekana envisions an army of peer coaches, graduates of GEEA programs that will serve as positive role models for other young women. The seeds of social change are already being planted through new attitudes and affirmative beliefs. "The camp was a turning point in my life," says GEEA camper Nom-pumelelo Makhubo. "I have learned not only to network and socialize but to be an independent young woman who is able to appreciate my life and my talents." ■

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